

EMPTY PEDESTALS PROJECT

April 25-May 25 1991

GALLERY HOURS
Tuesday-Saturday, 12-6 pm
OPENING RECEPTION
April 25, 6-8 pm

Today, in New York City, there are pedestals devoid of the sculpture for which they were designed. The only things left of the sculptural complexes are the classical bases. This is the point where we are now. The vacant space of failure surrounding these sites and the trauma imprinted on them by time are the opposite experience of their historical and civic intention. A thorough rethinking of public sculpture's visual language is necessary if we are to have a public art which is once again civic.

The original function of these works was their affirmation of European values by using classical forms in neighborhoods that were composed largely of European immigrants. Ironically, today, many of these same neighborhoods have been repopulated by ethnic groups of non-European origin whose cultural forms have little to do with the classical vocabulary of Western culture.

Is the site more important than the work? As a pre-designated art site, by this I mean a site coded as a space for art by the government, these to date have not been erased. These sites offer potential where present and new thoughts about public space and its enhancement by public art can be addressed.

I defer to the artists and architects in this forum to bring the dialogue concerning this phenomena into the present. These sites are powerful places. I encourage you to visit them.

— Marc Blane

Conceived by
MARC BLANE

PROPOSALS BY:

Ron Baron
Karen Bermann + Jeanine Centuori
Carl Chu
Curtis Cravens
Caleb Crawford
Sandy Gellis
Jesse Good
Steve Greene
Sheila Klein
Michael Lalicki
Paul Landon
Linda Lindroth + Craig Newick
Niki Logis
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Carolyn Moskowitz
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Dan Peterman
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Michele Sae + David Lindberg
Chris Scholz + Ines Elskop
Peter Sebök

STOREFRONT
for Art & Architecture

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STOREFRONT for Art and Architecture is a not-for-profit organization supported by the New York State Council on the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, foundations, corporations and individuals.



Jacob H. Schiff Fountain, 1901



Jacob H. Schiff Fountain, 1895



Discus Thrower pedestal, 1991



Discus Thrower, 1936



Greg Bus, circa 1930



Greg Bus pedestal, 1991



Corona Park Fountain, 1991



Corona Park Fountain, 1936

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Mel Chin

June 5 - July 6, 1991

THE STATE OF HEAVEN will directly address the severe nature of ozone depletion. The project will take the form of an immense hand-knotted carpet, the pattern corresponding to computer global cloud model. The carpet will "float" in a tent/harness and undergo a continual state of programmed destruction.

DISCUSSION PROGRAM

5/2

#55 Thursday, May 2, 6pm.

TOPIC: WHAT IS DESIGN? WHAT IS DESIGN EDUCATION?

MODERATOR: MICHAEL J. SHANNON

Michael Shannon's thesis is that design's perceived value in U.S. culture is diminished by the narrow, but commonly held view that design is solely a generator of artifacts. By confining design to the visual-spatial domain, we compromise its potential for societal renewal and reduction. Shannon believes that design is a universal human capability that can play a fundamental role in social evolution, in the process that transforms resources, energy and information to make our world. This recasting of design—a major cultural realignment—must begin, he believes, with education. Accordingly, he is working on curricula whereby students in grades K-12 will learn to see themselves as "citizen-designers," that is, as informed people who can both conceive a humane future and then manage the appropriate technology for realizing it.

Michael J. Shannon holds an A.B. degree in Architecture from Princeton University and is a doctoral candidate in Communication at Columbia Teachers College. His major project is establishing the non-profit Center for Design & Technology Education to develop K-12 curricula and teacher-training programs. He also runs the New York Forum for Design Education, a group of designers and educators that discusses and develops design education initiatives.

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Hooper Fountain, 1935



Hooper Fountain, 1991

FUNDING

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John Howard Payne, 1935



John Howard Payne, 1991

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"Before the inhabitant who wants to be in possession of his living space, from time to time in the waking dreams of diurnal and nocturnal perambulations, the ghost of his mother the city will rise. Most often neither ghost nor Eros remains: the city is now neither mother nor spouse nor mistress, it has become a 'framework' for living, as we say. Now, to 'live' a city is to live by it and be attached to it, and not to be inserted into a spatial framework."

Raymond Ledrut

"Speech and the Silence of the City"

The pedestals and their now absent loads put forth for consideration by the artists and architects participating in the Empty Pedestals Project are artifacts of the City Beautiful movement, ruins of the rise of the industrial city that now, at the turn of the millennium, finds itself largely in ruins.

The period following the Civil War was one of phenomenal and unfettered urban growth; businessmen and industrialists insisted on urban sites for their factories and financial concerns, and those seeking work and other sorts of possibilities gravitated to the cities from towns and rural areas as well as from abroad. The result as we know was over-crowded housing, unbreathable air, undrinkable water, omnipresent garbage, waste, and mass death from epidemic diseases. These conditions resulted in health reforms supported by a large cross-class constituency, while the "aesthetic reform," which eventually operated under the mantle of City Beautiful, was taken up, as usual, by members of the mid and upper middle class.

"Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty." This was the exhortation of Daniel Burnham, the chief architect of the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the urban design prototype synonymous with the City Beautiful, which functioned rather like a trade show for the architects and sculptors who could supply its trademarks. These were: academic classicism in public architecture and in the planning of monumental civic centers, public building groups, grand boulevards, ornamental parks, equestrian statues, elaborate fountains and other street ornaments. In the first decade of this century many large cities, such as New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia and growing metropolises like Kansas City, Seattle, Dallas, Dayton, Ohio and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, undertook City Beautiful projects of varying scales. However, despite the fact that popular receptiveness to civic sculpture in particular was also a legacy of post-Civil War nationalistic sentiment, the movement as a whole was gradually stigmatized as one of aesthetic and monument-obsessed effects for the upper classes; by the first meeting of the American Association of Planners in 1909 it was widely renounced in favor of a focus on more practical, efficiency and economy-enhancing concerns such as street and transit systems and designation of land use. After that point the City Beautiful ceded to the "city practical" and later the "city scientific," and the homes, discus throwers, and women with single names like Purity and Virtue became, depending on the reading, either quaint vestiges of an earnest optimism—that the city could not only be the site of economic opportunity, but the form for civilization at its most ideal, offering rich and variegated cultural, social and educational opportunities—or relics of a fascistic attempt to inculcate a respect for American culture and capitalism that would reinforce the hegemony of the economic elite, i.e. social control by design.

Today in the city when we come across one of these pedestals supporting nothing, or an empty fountain basin we may not notice any absence at all. In the same vicinity we will, however, take note of the empty buildings with boarded up or blocked off doors and windows; we hear neglect, impoverishment, despair and homelessness. If there is any ideal circulating at this moment it is that of the Livable City; the city must be made to function with order and efficiency, and everyone must have a home—to not possess a private locus of comfort, particularly in the cold and alien city, arouses most visceral empathy.

"New York's future should be shaped by the best of its past," reads *New York Ascendant*, the report of the mayor's commission on the year 2000 (1987). Thus we find the Livable City now being served by preservation, restoration and simulations of the past, and over time the framework may very well be patched up, operating smoothly and quietly, not so ugly, and unhoused people will primarily be those who will not be housed. And so through the ideological devices of conventional planning the city is to be relieved of its unlivability by an institution of the past—the site, which logic would indicate as the locale of the causes of present problems. This would appear to work something like a vaccine—administered against a future that is actually different, which might mean struggle for new existence, attempts to cure the "cold," as opposed to treating it (ourselves). But what about the *Livable* City as an alternative civic ideal? For, say, the French who have a tradition of attachment to the city this may appear as a ghost, but in this country that has no tradition of the city as a "work of life" it can only appear in vision.

Eight years ago the artist Marc Blane was moved by the silence of his neighborhood, the lower east side of Manhattan, on the subject of its own being and future, and he attempted to reactivate a site, the Jacob Schiff Fountain in Seward Park—that had originally been used for the communication of the City Beautiful ideal, but was then and still is derelict, covered with graffiti and missing its central column and two ornamental basins—by proposing the attachment of a work of art that was intended to communicate something of the aspirations present in local social life. Acting alone, he was unsuccessful in getting that particular proposal built, but the project continued to grow in scope as Blane identified and documented more of what he refers to as "predesignated art sites" (sites set aside by municipal agencies for art that have not been erased or slated for adoption/restoration). And it grew in concept as he determined that the creation of form fused to real habitation, or ideas for new existences should exceed solitary activity; such a social project would necessarily be rooted in collective action. Thus followed his collaboration with Storefront and the resultant selection of the four sites (representing varying existing conditions and pre-conceptions) as the bases of proposals by this group of artists and architects.

The Empty Pedestals Project is not offered as another ephemeral exercise in the making of public art (now bound to amenities, civilities, entertainments, the "art world"), but as an opening for communication about the potential for a new civic art in the post-industrial era—an art that could be synonymous with the ongoing work of life, of seeking and giving meaningful form to an evolving city by its inhabitants. It is a project, worth the attention of those who do not take comfort in the designation of a smart apartment in a dumb city.

—Jane Dodds

DEADLINES

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